

BEHIND THE BIG LADY

Recollections of Legs Bar

by

David C. Morrow

*Behind the Big Lady
Recollections of Legs Bar*

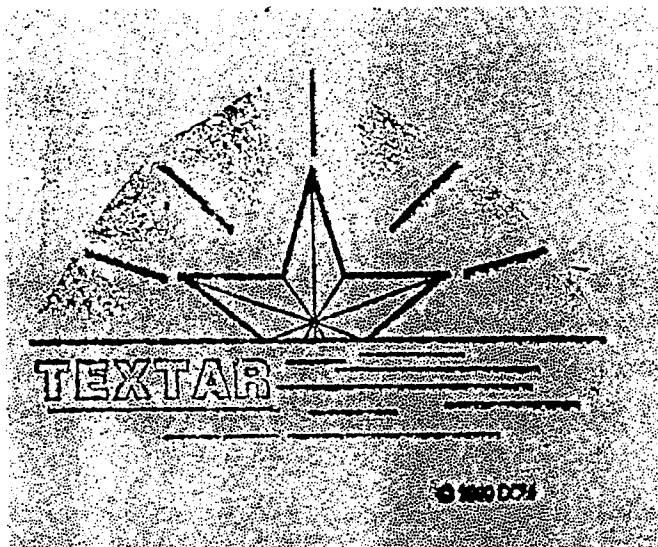
Published By

**Textar Media, Inc.
P. O. Box 7308
Corpus Christi,
Texas 78467-7308**

Copyright 2000 by David C. Morrow

ISBN 0-9641836-7-6

Printed in Texas



The names of performers are the
stage names they used.

In 1983 when I first stopped by the bar then called Babe's, later best known as Legs, it was already infamous for the Big Lady. This was a recently erected sign at the building's southeast corner, facing the intersection of Dodd Street with the SPID service road. Resembling a twenty-five foot paperdoll (the *Caller-Times* reported twenty-two feet, a radio commercial claimed thirty), for about sixteen years its painted on pictures of girls in skimpy outfits enraged a vocal proportion of the female population.

I enjoy taking breaks in my inevitably stodgy routine and watching people dance, my only reasons for going to bars. I never much liked alcohol, a distaste that increased over time, but at first it seemed to help adjust to the shift work I'd taken on. For a while, though, I didn't have much spare time. In the summer of

1983 my teenaged daughter wanted to stay with me while her mother traveled in Mexico, so I rented us a place in what was then the Galaxy Apartments at Mokry Street and SPID. Till she left in August I had my hands full.

Most convenient was The Cannery at 5111 Carroll Lane, just across a couple of streets. Walking distance mattered because I don't drive after even one drink until I've waited at least an hour, to which each drink adds time. The Cannery was pleasant enough with its dance floor and big screens showing music videos and I went back a couple of times after I moved despite the self-imposed wait at the Wienerschnitzel across Carroll Lane. As souvenirs I kept matchbooks and a T-shirt from a reopening. However, it was closed at my preferred time, afternoon, it suffered from the drawbacks of regular bars, and no matter how interesting their kinetic styles all the women stayed clothed.

Usually I sat at the right end of the bar, which was near the pool tables. I recall a couple of young bartenders and a waitress who could squirm to the music as she carried a loaded tray. For a while I would visit with a plain woman in her thirties, easygoing despite having obviously had a bumpy life. She quit showing up after the cops tried to run out all the dopers.

One evening a robust, good looking girl of about twenty-six asked if she could sit and talk. I said it was fine, not

only because she looked good but because she wasn't afraid to take the initiative. Confident, responsible women are sexy.

The Cannery, she complained, "looks like a nursery school," because everyone (except me, apparently) was so young. It was different from the last time she'd been there, a while before, since she'd just gotten out of the military. Hawaii, her last station, was non-Western outside the cities, a deplorable thing I gathered, and she'd assisted in various surgical procedures. I found her accounts of these interesting because I was a former Army medic who'd always liked bioscience. I hadn't known the military provided the purely cosmetic procedures she was describing.

"Can you guess what branch I was in?" she asked, as though she'd been awaiting the opportunity.

"You were a Marine," I said.

"How did you know that?"

If she'd been anything else, she wouldn't've asked, but I wasn't sure she'd accept so simple and mechanical an explanation. Sixteen years after drinking nearly that many beers, I can't remember what clever response I did give, meaning I'd overindulged. She insisted we dance. Once on the floor I knew I was way past disinhibition and into rigid control. I knew I couldn't be clever and acrobatic at the same time, I realized evenings like this weren't helping me relax.

Then another time a quietly confident fellow whose contrasting auras of humor and nerdiness suggested depth rather than incompetence struck up a conversation. As he was telling me his mother owned Suzy's topless bar the door opened and a stunningly voluptuous young woman staged an entrance.

About twenty-two years old, she wore 1940s clothes and hair style. It wasn't clear whether she actually knew anybody but she locked gazes with someone on the dance floor, affording me a brief profile of her gorgeous face, flamboyantly removed her lady's fedora with its decorative veil from her brown shoulder long hair, and began dancing. Extravagantly. Overdancing. It was obvious the Forties Girl, whom my drinking buddy told me was a topless dancer, was wired on coke. It was also obvious to the plainclothes couple who quietly told her to meet them outside. Suzy's son, whom I never saw again, told me the cops were trying to clean The Cannery of riffraff.

I didn't connect the place with him till I started this memoir because it later became Club Paradise, but I did go to Suzy's a few times in my search for the right topless bar. It had some good looking dancers, memorably a polite blonde who affected an old sports coat and a Panama hat. I didn't go often and the last time was in 1987, because its location in Woodlawn Plaza

at 3797 Leopard Street was inconvenient. It was too close to school crossings and too far from home and neither Woodlawn nor nearby Saxet Center had in their deteriorating state anywhere to recuperate even from the single beer I'd have there.

The Office, once an ice cream parlor, stood across Booth Street from the Seven Seas Fish Market, at 1534 South Staples. When the fish market was torn down in December of 1999 the bar was known as Ginia's. The Office was small, scruffy, comfortable, and in a good location. By parking at Six Points I could take a long enough walk, with stops to peruse McGinnis Bookstore and drink coffee, to drive safely. I spent a number of pleasant afternoons there that left a few incidents in memory.

There was, for instance, a girl whose outfit showed good aesthetic sense. She sat at my table, cute with a spray of little flowers arranged over one ear, and when I complimented her on it she told me she was real smart. Real, real smart. So I asked her something I doubted she'd know. "I knew that!" she said when I told her the answer: that Shongopovi is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the United States. I immediately felt bad for impulsively puncturing so brittle a person, but it was too late. I suppose I left her angry and embarrassed, as I suppose she's left a series of boyfriends and husbands since before then.

Similar was another well situated bar where I spent nearly as many afternoons. The Toy Box was located in what later became the dermatology clinic at 4521 South Staples. It was convenient both to my Mokry apartment and to the old family house I moved into late in 1984. I would park at Padre Staples Mall, which gave me a nice long walk past the movie theater, past car lots demolished at the end of 1999, and back to plenty of stores to look through.

On an early visit a cute dancer who resembled Carole Channing demanded from the stage that I smile, which I refused to do. Once right after the club opened for the day I was sitting at the bar while a lanky black girl regarded me with an expression at once pensive and anticipatory. I imagined she was thinking, "I can't wait to show myself to this guy." Then again, maybe she was thinking, "Holy smoke, this guy's gonna see my boobs." Two dancers entered just then and got into a slapping melee, crying and cursing; the bartender shook his head and swore he hated working with women.

There was an amply endowed girl about five feet eight or nine inches tall whose attributes almost made up for her being so stupid it was amazing she lived outside an institution. So stupid she seldom got to work on time and was apparently told not to bother coming in at all.

A blonde about nineteen who somewhat resembled my daughter appeared there mid 1984. Dancing one afternoon, she leaned toward me without a pause and lay an index finger on her cheekbone pointing to an eye, pulling slightly on the lower lid in the era's pickup gesture. I nodded and she came to my table when her set was over. She called herself Candi, said she was from Chicago, staying here for vague reasons with her uncle. Unpracticed, she wrote her stage name and phone number on one of the index cards I carry without my buying her a drink or myself a lapdance.

I figured she'd be at home and her uncle wouldn't about two hours before the bar opened. I was right, but Candi was so totally crashed the phone had to ring a long time before rousing her almost to coherence. I got tired of waiting for her to answer the second time, and the last time I called I counted fifty-seven rings before she answered, seemingly uncertain as to who either of us were. That nonsense might have excited boys, but it bored me. She never got any black lace bras or stiletto heels on my account. I last saw her some time in 1985, when after some time I went to The Toy Box to see a feature performer, a stripper called Marlana.

As Marlana danced a rather nerdy looking guy sitting directly at stageside turned to his friend and said, "After this I'm gonna go home and tell my wife what a loser she is."

Marlena took off her copious brassiere, folded it with one stiff cup inside the other, and deposited it on his head like a dunce cap.

Candi recognized me, telling me as she bustled about serving drinks that since Marlena had been there the place had been hectic. That was probably my last visit. I recall seeing The Toy Box closed, then reopened as the clinic. It had been a comfortable place.

I looked into several other places. Peppers, at 1402 Rodd Field Road, constructed on much the same plan as The Cannery, was a comfortable and long lasting bar. Baby-O II (Number I was on Corona Street), which existed briefly in the now demolished building at 4449 Ayers that had for decades been The Western Palms, was big. It had several stages and a seeming multitude of performers. So did Bottoms Up (5945 Williams), another long lasting club. All had the virtues of male oriented businesses that regular taverns lacked: few people playing mind games, a relaxed atmosphere, and early opening times. None of these places were well enough situated, though, and I ended up going there only to see feature performers – famous strippers and porn actresses – and if I had more than one drink the rest would be non-alcoholic.

One of the bars I checked out was Babe's, soon called PT's and then Legs. Despite its being only a few blocks from the house I'd inherited I was sufficiently put off after a few visits to not return for some time. A couple of years before, I'd heard, someone shot the manager through the head as he sat at a table, but that alleged incident – I never investigated it and still don't know whether it actually happened – wasn't the reason.

Neither was the Big Lady, which made the place attractive. It was at that time as it often was, a sore point. Since it was found (like each later version) not to violate any obscenity laws, in 1983 the sign's opponents were attacking on the basis of a supposed dangerous vulnerability to high winds. It proved up to building codes as long as it stood. I wonder that nobody has ever pointed out that during that time no hurricane came close enough to the city to do major harm.

The Big Lady was one example of such local advertisement art. Another was its contemporary at Seawitch, a used book and collectible store where Horne Road crosses Ayers. This large painting of a mermaid wearing a scallop shell bra beside a treasure chest, mounted above the store front, was intended to be

more cute than sexy. It was removed in 1999 when Seawitch closed.

Most like the Big Lady was a girlie icon belonging to the Pick's drive in diner at 2002 Ayers Street. Besides the yellow neon miner's picks digging into its roof the restaurant sported a twelve, maybe fifteen foot curbside carhop. Duplicated on both sides of the metal silhouette, the girl stood tiptoe holding a tray of mugs before and above her head; she looked over her shoulder in openmouthed joy at viewers going either way on Ayers. She wore boots, short shorts, skimpy shirt tied midriff, and a pillbox cap below which poured a cascade of curls. Under the tray a vertical support bore the logo "Pick's", and both dopplegangers were correspondingly detailed in neon tubes of several colors that glowed softly at night. Aside from the fact that my mother didn't like it I don't know whether the sign infuriated women in the 1950s. I don't remember when it was taken down.

The Big Lady had a pipe frame in front of the bar's Dodd and SPID corner, though a picture I have of the bar as PT's shows it standing there on the ground beside a portable sign that bore the words "Topless Revue." At some point Legs built a planter box of railroad ties at the feet of the mounted sign, which were about chest height, that last contained a struggling crop of elephant ears.

The building itself, then listed as 2532 SPID, was a single story cinderblock square with wooden siding along the front – the south – face. As PT's the bar had the siding white with red trim, as Legs, brown. The roof overhung the sidewalk that extended along the east and south sides, and was supported on square pillars made of wooden planks. Blocked windows on these sides indicated the building once had a different use. A small wooden vestibule crossing the sidewalk in front had doors opening east and west. The corner behind the girlie sign was flattened and held a seldom used door and a mail slot.

There were other signs on the bar. There was a frame on the roof holding a sign that faced SPID, illuminated at night, that said "Legs". Left of the word was a pair of stockinged legs, thighs to feet, belonging to an unseen reclining woman, one flexed, one partly extended. Some times there would be a plastic banner across the sloping roof overhang. There remained for years a small square sign on the wall facing Dodd Street that read: "No motorcycles in parking lot".

The parkinglot, partly asphalted and always scattered with trash, surrounded the bar with the most space north and west. Customers usually parked in front, where metal railing and parking blocks separated vehicles from the sidewalk, and on the similar east. A billboard rose high over the roof in the west, supported a

few feet from the cinderblock wall by three heavy I-beams. The back door, opening on a nondescript stretch, was at the building's north side where there were utility boxes, trash bins, and, I once counted, five air conditioners. This space was bounded by the wire fence of a large house with a large yard and, to the west, the wire fence of a used car lot. Near Dodd Street by the residence's fence stood a dumpster on a spot gouged by truck tires, and east across the street was a Shamrock filling station called the Corner Store.

The first time I entered I was plunged into near total darkness. I smelled the bar's characteristic blend of cigarette smoke, beer, and indelible sweepings and felt the vibrations of music blaring in that particular interior, but it was the sudden darkness that hijacked attention. It was darker than any bar I can recall, and some years later a dancer told me she always came in with one eye closed. I hesitated to avoid walking into what I guessed was a chair and looked toward the lights over the bar. A shape materialized.

"I'm not going to bite you." It was a girl in a slip, completing my not particularly endearing introduction to the place.

"I can't see."

She showed me an empty table and brought a beer.

The room that emerged into visibility changed little during the next decade and a half. Right of the entrance was a

small counter that held bowls of matchbooks and at some point a cash register I don't recall ever being used. Behind it and to the right the disc jockey's booth as a step up, with windows overlooking the stage and floor. Inside it the sound level was minimal, as I found once when I was paged from work and the bartender said I should use the phone there. Straight back from the small counter, beside snack and cigarette machines, was the dressing room door. I never went in, so my guess is it ran from behind the stage to the mail slotted door.

Left of someone entering, a waist high wooden partition with a door opening on its barroom side enclosed a section for pool tables. I took to putting my left hand on this to get my bearings. I never played pool there, or for that matter anywhere since I was in the Army.

The stage, at the barroom's east end, I recall as originally square with a central dancepole and no door. Dancers used steps against the wall on either side. The 1995 remodeling left it larger, circular, with a wing toward the front door bearing a second pole, another set of steps that were close to the bar and the women's restroom, and a curtained dressingroom door midstage. Overhead floodlamps, controlled by the deejay, were made more colorful, including adding blacklights, in 1995. There may (in 1983) have been a smaller stage opposite to the main stage, but in

1995, anyhow, one at least temporarily existed. The west wall was, and remained, mirrored.

There were table and chair sets but no booths that I recall. The actual bar extended from the west wall most of the way across the back of the room. I never sat there in the original club because it seemed incredibly dirty. The utility room behind it was its outlet, connecting to the short hall between the barroom and the back door.

The men's restroom was immediately left of someone entering the back door. It was paired with the women's, the door of which was a few feet off the short hall and faced the stage. On the wall between them, whether it was always there or not I can't remember, was a bilingual sign saying that condoms help prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. In the men's room, at least, a pair of condom and lubricant vending machines were mounted on the back wall above the sinks.

Another young woman in a slip pulled out a chair at my table, sat with a cheerful "Hi," and soon announced, "Today's my birthday."

"Oh, do I get to spank you?" I asked.

"No," she said, composed.

A couple of dancers began to wrap tinsel around the dance pole and drape it floodlamp to floodlamp.

"Does this have something to do with your birthday?"

"I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised."

She was smiling. Apparently she was popular with the other girls, and happy enough with it to forgo trying to wheedle drinks or a lapdance; as though on important business she got up and went elsewhere. I'd finished my beer so I left.

It was my second visit or so when another obviously self-assured girl, onstage that time, showed me the same gesture Candi had, like her without interrupting her dance. When I gave the same response she paused for a brief exchange with the big well built waitress.

Her set done, the dancer gathered her costume on one arm and exited stage in her bikini bottom to sit beside me and dress with slow, studied immodesty. The waitress brought a large champagne bottle and two wine glasses.

"Wait," I said, "I didn't order any drinks." The dancer looked surprised but the calmly businesslike waitress recovered bottles and classes and left.

I wasn't about to pay maybe \$ 50 for cheap wine I didn't order and I was irked by the equally cheap attempt to get me to. I wondered why this blonde, good looking in her sleeveless green top and bikini bottom, had thought I would fall for that trick. I decided not to waste time, choosing words guaranteed to repulse

any female: "I don't have much money." Sure enough, she left. I imagine she was also a bit embarrassed.

On one of a couple of less memorable visits when the wonderfully buxom waitress passed my table I indicated the stage and asked, "When is it your turn to get up there?"

"Oh, I don't do that."

"That's too bad. Some of these little girls are so skinny I'm afraid they'll starve to death."

"Oh, she's really pretty," she said about the girl onstage. It was a rule almost never broken that the women never criticized and always complimented other female employees.

"Well, I'd give you a big tip if you did."

Finally, there was the time yet another saucy blonde waited on my table. She said she was from New Jersey and insisted when I said I hadn't seen her before that she had worked there for years. I had a lite beer — I always drank lite for the illusion it wasn't fattening — usually Budweiser or Miller through no particular preference. Once finished, I decided to have another and discovered when she brought it that my smallest bill was a five.

"I'll be right back with your change," she said.

I drank slowly, not just because I was waiting for my change but because it enabled me to see as many dancers as I could per beer. After a couple of more dancers, though, I was finished,

didn't want another, tired of waiting. The girl never came back and I didn't see her anywhere. The change was too trivial an amount to make an issue of, so I left. When I mentioned this at work I heard that at least one other person there, Eugene de Leon, had been shortchanged at Babe's, or PT's, whichever it was then.

That had been maybe late summer of 1985 and I only went back around mid 1987 when its convenient location made it more appealing. The Big Lady had been repainted during this time, which is likely when the bar became PT's. When it became Legs I don't recall, but I must have been going there at the time.

Entering was still a plunge into temporary darkness filled with the same *amalgam* of tavern smells. The bar still looked too dirty to sit at. It turned out, though, that there had been a form of housecleaning. The big buxom waitress was gone and so was the thieving little blonde. I didn't know how many dancers remained because I hadn't gone often enough to know any. The only real detail I can recall from that visit is telling the girl who brought my beer that I hadn't been there in a long time because I'd been ripped off. She assured me it wouldn't happen again, and it never did.

I took to going there one and occasionally two afternoons a month between, more or less, April and October. The short walk between there and my house not only demanded no extra time or money, but combined one favorite activity, savoring the sunsplashed tropical days, with another, watching naked women dance. Except to see some feature performers I quit going to other bars.

I still never sat at the bar but at a table near though never up against the stage. I would have two beers and drink slowly enough to watch each stripper, deciding which one to tip. When her turn came again I would give her the standard dollar bill when she removed her top, then leave. If a girl sat at my table I'd tell her that she was welcome but that I wouldn't buy her a drink. I didn't want her to waste time trying, I would explain, and didn't expect her to stay if she didn't want to. With one exception, they would soon leave.

During the following eight years Legs seemed to me a popular place. It was on a main route, convenient to the businesses along SPID, and near a major intersection, but I recall someone telling me later that it had a bad location. That could be why the owner put up the Big Lady, a guaranteed attention getter and probably more controversial than intended. I heard persons who

wouldn't be caught dead there use the sign as a reference point when giving directions.

More important seems to have been the bar's comfortable atmosphere. It stayed open till two in the morning and opened around noon. Even that early in the daytime it seemed usually to attract enough customers: men with the day off, retirees, truckers and others with mobile jobs, persons out to lunch, salesmen -- some with clients -- individuals of uncertain occupation and intent. Out of town instructors at the Water Department's licensing schools mentioned going there at day's end.

Like most topless bars Legs lacked much sexual tension. Places like The Cannery generated far more, along with personal stress and negativity. Male oriented institutions have definite rules, including the rule against changing rules on whim or to escape responsibility, that apply to everyone. In topless bars men aren't driven by the curiosity that enables women to lead them on because the whole point is that they can see the women naked. For their part, the performers have to rely as much on wits and personality as on sex appeal but they don't have to pretend they aren't trying to get money. I think this absence of conflict and deceit is why some people find such places shallow, empty, even false while others find them relaxing.

Most women believe, or pretend to believe that male entertainments are the exact opposite. They imagine men watching strippers going inevitably from whistling to yelling to jumping about and groping waitresses to running amok. Partly this is a Hollywood presentation created to make strip scenes effective when nudity couldn't be shown. Another factor is misanthropic women using drunks as a male stereotype. It's also a likely excuse for their acting that way on "ladies'" nights. Underlying these must be the pettiness and spite that fill so much of women's emotional life; here, resentment of women who, brought down to the lower status of men, can see men's genuine personal qualities. During a 1990s topless bar furor a Legs dancer told me other women imagined "constant orgies" there.

A television movie from that very time dramatizes these female fantasies. A sweet, pretty girl is tricked by a sleazy male entrepreneur into becoming a dancer. In a pivotal scene a bloated, leering middleaged drunk grabs her ankle from his stageside seat. Tearfully she manages to pull away and continue dancing, for which the boss chews her out.

In reality that guy would have been thrown out and the girl comforted by the boss and co-workers. Not only is it illegal for a customer to touch a dancer (dancers *can* touch them), it violates

the rules. Customers can't verbally harass them, either. Bouncers are present in case alcohol and boorishness take over.

I don't recall seeing any customers harass a Legs performer, but around 1985 I was at The Office when a couple of young guys were giving a tall, lithe dancer a hard time. As she danced they said something and her reply made them laugh, especially one who got up and went around their stageside table to say something else she didn't like. He returned to his seat and, pausing, she leaned forward pointing a long finger in their faces, adding some obviously choice words to an exchange that I found totally inaudible. Both laughed and said something more. This time the girl exited stage, spoke to the bartender, resumed dancing. The next time the duo said something the bartender and another man threw them out.

Dancers are neither dupes nor slaves. I best knew Legs' dancers, who incidentally tended to have more original stage names than the seemingly ubiquitous Bambi and Barbi and Brandi, but others were much the same. Sensibly reticent about crucial personal details, dancers seldom minded explaining why they were there and were usually very upbeat about it. Each had her reasons for choosing that occupation. These reasons fit into a few general categories, and only one dancer ever told me it was the only thing

she could do. This one hispanic girl at The Office said she'd dropped out of high school and couldn't get any other job. It could've been a tale told to get sympathy money but it seemed true. Sitting at a table in only a pair of shorts, she looked pained as she spoke and gripped one hand with her other, her gaze going to the back wall.

Most of them told me they could make far more money dancing than they could at regular jobs and could decide their own schedules as well. What they considered important was being able to maximize time with their families, and some could make enough in a couple of days to spend the rest of the week with their children. A few claimed to be financing an education or a future business. About as many admitted being too lazy to hold down any other kind of job.

Those are their real reasons, but since the majority of women don't choose to be strippers there are also more private motives. Of these I could pick up clues and venture guesses. Many had family backgrounds that didn't stress modesty, while young women are likely to be less inhibited and more rebellious or daring. Most positively enjoyed walking around without clothes in roomfuls of men, whatever their upbringing and age. Some exhibitionists were clearly ego tripping on other females' envy of their immodesty or endowments as well as on their command of

male attention. Other dancers were doubtless acting out psychodramas unknown to anyone not personally involved.

I distrust the agendized theories of so-called social scientists, but some performers do seem to be seeking acceptance. A popular stripper and men's magazine model once appeared at Baby-O II. A true natural beauty, blonde, athletic, well over six feet tall, about twenty-five years old, she virtually radiated genuine friendliness and enjoyment. But whenever she walked through the barroom, which she did a couple of times, and men greeted her with cheers and whistles, she seemed to just melt.

Some temporaries, out of towners usually, were having pre or post marital flings or taking vacations from their regular lives. A few were practicing for deeper involvement in the sex industry or dancing as a sideline to it. There were criminals, drawn by the job's simplicity and for the typically shallow reason that many people disapprove of it.

Other women seem to imagine that topless dancers are uniformly beautiful and have enormous breasts. I'd say that while there probably are slightly more good looking women in this than in other businesses the difference isn't all that great. Close to half of all dancers are average looking and of the rest some are plain and a few downright ugly. Most have average sized breasts and not a few, small ones. There are completely flat chested women

making good livings as dancers, and also some amazingly fat ones. As far as I'm concerned most dancers are too skinny and several cup sizes too small.

Women's ideas of what interests men are usually formed by what other women tell them. Men like variety and their personal preferences are quite individual, but because women are arrogant and generally rude toward them one thing all men respond to is pleasantness and politeness even when they know it's an act. That's why I've seen girls less shapely than an Idaho spud dancing with every strap and string stuffed with bills and more piling up at their feet.

Most Legs dancers were white, some were hispanic, and occasional black girls would work there a while. Generally, bars sort out along ethnic lines. In 1999 Ginia's and the Doll House, also at Six Points, were hispanic: staff, dancers, customers. I never went to a black topless bar, though in the early 1960s I sometimes went to The Downbeat Club. If any dancers were American Indian I couldn't tell them from people who called themselves hispanic (like anglo, a vague linguistic term covering a racial spectrum). I don't recall dancers of Chinese or Vietnamese type, though in 2000 a couple of girls at Peppers appeared to be filipinas.

Dancers in effect rented space in which to perform. They paid certain amounts I don't remember to the house, the bartender, and the deejay. This was called the "tipout". Hopefully, it would come out of their tips, and though the usual tip was a dollar bill a dancer could clear a couple of hundred dollars or more in a couple of hours. Besides onstage dancing, they did table dances and lap dances for amounts I also forget, and received a cut of the inflated price of the drinks they tried to get customers to buy them. They were also entitled to, I think, two beers and a mixed drink plus coffee and soft drinks. Interestingly, they told me that the more girls who were present the more tips each girl got. As far as I could tell, never having thought to ask, they danced in the order they arrived at work, they worked eight or ten hour shifts (longer if they wanted to), and chose the days and shifts they worked.

The ability to decide their own schedule helped attract dancers and keep them at a club, and the more of them there were the more latitude and money there would be for each. Thus girls leaving could create a downward business spiral because there would be fewer customers and remaining dancers would have fewer and fewer schedule options.

During the early 80s I saw a couple of performers at different bars. One was a striking young lady under five feet tall

whose bearing and expression suggested she was in her early twenties. She was a real beauty with the flawlessly exquisite body of a girl fifteen or sixteen years old and she had the delightful habit of walking about offstage wearing only a G-string. With her brown nape length hair curling about her head like a halo, she reminded me of the adolescent nudes victorian painters liked to insert into historical and mythological scenes. I saw her at The Office, The Toy Box, maybe PT's and that was it. I could tell she remembered me in one place from another, but we never spoke and I don't even know her stage name. At least I'm left with the image of her young girl loveliness unspoiled by discovering that she was arrogant or vicious or an idiot.

In this vein lies the possibility of chance meetings with dancers in other places. A girl at Legs later had a humorous slant on this, but I only experienced it twice, at least twice when I recognized the girl, again in the 80s. I saw two dancers from The Office, neither outstandingly good looking, one anglo girl who gave off unpleasant vibes and lent new meaning to the term "dirty dancing", one hispanic and seemingly very personable and good natured. The first was buying groceries with her husband or boyfriend in what I remember as a Krogers on SPID near Ayers, the second was horsing around with a male companion in front of the Circle K at SPID and Carroll Lane. Both knew I'd seen them at

work but no acknowledgments passed. There was no reason for them to.

Despite the popular idea of topless bars as criminal dens the cops, at least during the era considered here, had more control than usually thought. One time, in 1996 I think, I was talking with a performer called Jeannie when the deejay paged her through the sound system. She left for a few minutes and when she returned I asked if she'd had to arrange her music or schedule. She explained that the cops were there to check dancers' IDs, run warrant checks, and take Polaroids of them. As part of their routine, she said, they kept employee files for the IRS since dancers were supposed to report their own earnings.

Other women support the idea that topless bars are criminal enterprises because of fantasies of victimization and of rivals as abandoned sluts. Yet except for Candi, dancers interested in dating were careful to find out whether I were married or seriously involved.

I've mentioned that performers don't criticize and always build up others. They interact with customers in ways paralleling other women's necessary socializing with strangers. Although not common topics, a dancer could discuss sexual experiences and her own anatomy in details others would share

only with girlfriends and doctors and give not a clue as to their actual identity. The real act is to stimulate men without feeling any sexual arousal themselves. All women do this at some time, and all women use clothes and makeup, talk and body language to send messages to men and other women. Any error, however inadvertent, can be embarrassing because it sends the wrong message or can be misinterpreted. Topless dancers sometimes have that happen when completely extraneous things cause the same signs as arousal.

There was the brisk October afternoon I decided it was time to stay home for the season. The bar was icy, the air conditioners were going full blast in preparation for the evening crowd, and the weather was uncomfortable. I decided that on the way out I would tip the dancer who happened to be on stage, a slender girl by then down to her bikini bottom. It couldn't have been more than sixty degrees inside the bar and I was amazed that anyone, much less someone with such a taut, fatless little body, could be prancing about nude.

She squatted at the edge of the stage when I stopped there.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked.

She misunderstood what I said. For an instant she lost her cultivated aloofness and with the half artificial laughter of a

toddler who wet herself in public she briefly crossed her forearms in front of her teacup breasts. I hadn't even noticed whether the temperature had affected her appearance. Immediately she regained composure. As though nothing had happened she held her bikini tie away from her hip so I could insert the dollar.

Performances weren't the classic striptease with breakaway formals and street clothes removed piece by piece to a drumbeat or as part of a skit. I've seen old films of these routines, as well as movie versions, and elements of them appear in recent female shows, but they belong to another era. Nor were they the abstract dance poems shown in movies like *Flashdance* to dramatize character and appeal to female moviegoers. In the aftermath of the 1960s it's unnecessary to disguise female display and in most places such elaborate shows would now be too expensive to routinely stage. A few bars have props for occasional variety including onstage showers and bathtubs in the barroom, and some have mud wrestling and such, but I never saw these at Legs, or most of the places I went to. Dancing remains a structure and *faux* reason for exhibition but the aim now is to get to maximum legal exposure with little buildup and to give individual if public displays to men who tip.

At Legs, as in other places two dances, usually to different songs, made a set. During the first a dancer usually kept her top on though she didn't have to. During the second she usually had her breasts exposed. In some places, at least, she actually didn't have to do that and I've seen a few who seldom if ever showed theirs, none that I recall from Legs, but I doubt they made much money. Sometimes a dancer stripped during the second song, sometimes she undressed before dancing, almost always, rather curiously, with her back to the audience. If there was a second stage she danced a second set there while another girl took the main stage.

Topless dancing is as much the success of the idea "do your own thing" as of exhibitionism. Though few gave truly polished performances or seemed to have formal training, most dancers thought about and practiced the routines they developed in kinetic dialog of self-expression with audience response. They shared a fund of moves that included bits of striptease and ballroom and popular and exotic dance with the body language women use to get male attention and such possibilities of setting as climbing the pole. Those who could capitalized on special abilities, usually control of popular muscles like pecs and glutes; the little teenaged appearing girl who changed bars could ripple the muscles up and down her back in waves. Girls with exceptional figures

often used loose dresses to make the first dance of a set into a peekaboo act. Regular moves were turning their backs to the audience and bending forward to grab their ankles, and sprawling, open leg displays. Of these and other elements each developed her own particular show.

Their personal styles carried over into table and lap dances. The first, performed at customers' tables, would be much like the stage performances with fewer embellishments; a girl isn't likely to roll about on the barroom floor. The more expensive lap dances are likely the performances other women most detested. Here the dancer did her gyrations around and up against a seated customer, which put her crotch and derriere at face level, shimmying, squirming, twisting while standing and kneeling between his legs, draping herself over him, rubbing her chest against his face.

Usually customers went to the stage to tip. A few simply tossed their dollar onstage, but most awaited a personal performance, a version of lapdancing. The participants had the same relative positions but it was easier for the dancer to rub her breasts on a customer (why some guys tipped before a girl was topless is a mystery to me) and she could hook a leg over his shoulder. Finally, she would turn a hip toward him and hold a string away from her flesh so he could place the bill, usually

concluding with a dry kiss. Some extravagantly endowed girls, most often feature performers, could take the bill from a customer's lips between their breasts, using palms or elbows to clamp their cleavage on it. When a set ran out with tippers remaining the deejay would replay enough of the last song for the dancer to get all her tips and each tipper his show.

Not all tippers, incidentally, were men. Now and then women were customers, usually with a male companion – date or “beard” – but sometimes with another female. I occasionally saw pairs, but never groups of women in topless bars. Once when a seven foot feature performer appeared at Peppers (she really was that tall) two women presented her with flowers as well as tips and got more than perfunctory kisses.

Dancers wore their costumes, maybe with an additional loose dress or wrap, everywhere in the bar, often not changing during a shift. They could be creative with their outfits, but I don't recall anyone experimenting with the regular underwear that was a 1980s trend. Clever girls might hide weak points: one with thin calves, for example, might wear swirly petticoats, sheathe skirts, sarong wraps, or legwarmers. Usually dancers wore what was inexpensive and practical. Frequent outfits were bikinis, shorts and halter combos, loose dresses and G-strings, and one piece swimsuits that could be peeled down. Likely the first two things a

beginner learns are that most men don't care about the details of female clothes and that they are less critical of women's bodies than are other females.

Most dancers had short to mid length hair though the aforementioned Jeannie wore hers long and straight. None had big hair and none that I remember from Legs had burrs or shaved heads, but there could have been some and some long haired girls with wigs. Many of them, after all, were more or less in disguise. Makeup was heavier than for average wear for that reason as well as because lights and perspective demanded it. A few Legs girls had tattoos but I don't recall any with piercings.

Legs performances were carried on to music played loudly enough to penetrate the whole building without smothering normal conversation. The music was nearly always hard rock, occasionally heavy metal, though country-western or tejano seemed more appropriate to some of the dancers. I don't recall hearing any rap music at Legs. I don't know most of the music though I would recognize it if I heard it, because during the 80s, when I was converting from LPs to CDs (and bars from tapes to CDs) I could no longer keep up with the sheer diversity of new music. I do remember often hearing The Eagles, Led Zeppelin, Bob Seger, ZZ Top, and occasionally Fleetwood Mac.

The deejay was emcee, announcing each performer and urging customers to be generous in a monologue style resembling that of radio deejays. He would maintain interest when the girls weren't ready and during breaks, when he also played long songs. His commentary continued the action. "And now the magical mystical Miss Jeannie." "Now a tour of Asia, and I bet you pay special attention to the mountains." "How *does* she do that?" "Tips and tips alone, that's what these ladies work for, so don't be stingy." Topless dancers, like massage parlor workers and lingerie models, were always "ladies". "Don't be shy. Step right up and slip a tip on her hip." Sometimes it was appropriately raunchy: "Are you reaching in your pocket to give her a tip or are you just jacking off?" "Put your hands together for Miss Jade. Now she's going to be stepping down there into the party zone for a little up close and personal, available for lapdances and..."

After spending part of a spring day in 1989, cleaning my yard I decided to cool off at Legs. A dancer asked if she could sit at my table and I told her it was okay but that I wouldn't buy her a drink. She was one of those women, neither skinny nor shapeless, whom I find particularly attractive. About average height, she had long straight fine blonde hair — certainly its original color and certainly a dye job — and a wonderful just noticeable country

accent. She offered a hand and said her name was Jeannie. Although I couldn't recall seeing her before she assured me she'd been there for years.

When for some reason I mentioned I didn't especially like alcohol she said she could bring coffee or soft drinks or even milk if I wanted, but I stuck with my Miller Lite. Like the fictional lamas of Shangri-La I considered moderation in all things, moderation included, best. The instant this allusion came to mind I felt it was out of place so I said, "I like to take breaks from my usual routine."

A month or so later I left my car for repairs at an Exxon — either the one at SPID and Everhart or the one at SPID and Airline, both razed in 1999 to be replaced by Circle K stores — and hiked back. When I got there I was nearly home but I stopped at Legs, which seemed even darker than usual because I'd spent so long a time in the summer sun, where Jeannie appeared at my table. I said I was hot and tired and needed a lite.

"Been working in your yard?" she stated as much as asked.

Again I wasn't sure whether to be truthful. I don't know why I didn't hitch a ride from a mechanic, but I dislike dealing in favors too much to call anyone and taxis cost too much. Could I explain all that and the sensual pleasure I felt walking miles under

the blazing tropical sun? I simply acknowledged the question and that seemed good enough.

In fact, as I got to know her Jeannie proved a very accepting, thoughtful, pleasant person. We spent much time visiting at my table and, later, the bar during the next several years. I told her I wouldn't buy her a drink or myself a dance and never did. She said she appreciated my being "up front" about it.

Originally from Kerrville, she had as a teenager gone to a club in this very building; at the time I'd have been attending either nearby Lexington Place or South Park school. She had run bars "bigger than this one" in San Antonio and I once heard her telling someone she'd been under contract to dance in Air Force clubs for a few years.

Jeannie said she danced because she'd always wanted to be an entertainer. She told me that one year at the Terlingua Chili Cookoff she decided that if men didn't have to wear shirts, neither did she. She spent the festival topless and nobody bothered her. She appeared on television and in *The San Antonio Express-News* with the aid of a borrowed pair of suspenders. She was certainly well endowed enough to be famous for that exhibition, and while I once heard her tell someone she measured only thirty-nine inches around the chest my own estimate credited her with half a foot more. Yet she possessed an innate sense of propriety

and an intuitive understanding of the fine distinction between openness and crassness.

I'd known her a while when in 1991 Jeannie asked how old I thought she was. I couldn't tell for sure but I thought she might be forty-five or forty-six so I said thirty-eight. I could see she didn't believe that as she told me she was fifty-three. She actually did have the body of someone about forty, one that, given her upper dimensions, was in amazing defiance of gravity, and it was necessary to literally be in her face to see lines that suggested she was older. She exercised regularly, not that dancing and waiting tables eight or so hours a day weren't exercise, watched her diet, drank little, and detested smoking. She got attention and tips from young men and those plus respect from older ones, in a profession most women quit in their thirties.

She was fortunate in liking her work and being able to continue long past the time few women would dare, but she had a dimension of sadness. It didn't appear immediately, so it wasn't the common trick of acting unhappy to get men's "help". She'd had serious illnesses she thought might recur, though she'd overcome them and then some. She'd been married for twelve years, or divorced twelve years before. Mentioning it saddened her and she volunteered little about it so I didn't ask or ever repeat anything she did say. Her children were adults with children and her deepest

concerns were her family and friends. Not surprisingly she liked animals. She was poor, she said, partly because she would go all out to help people. "Too good hearted" was how she described herself. She said she wanted to retire, she sometimes planned what she would do, but said she couldn't afford to.

Gradually she revealed herself as a very sensitive person. Sometimes she seemed disproportionately upset by things. Once she and a granddaughter were entering or exiting an HEB store when a man said, "Good evening , ladies, if that's what you are." It bothered her enough for her to relate it to me a few days afterward. Another time I found her worried because her truck, a big pickup the same cherry red as a sporty little car she also drove, had been scratched along one side. It was repaired before I could see it, so I had no clue; it could've been due to a drunk clumsily maneuvering his own vehicle in the parkinglot or to random vandalization. She may have had in mind another dancer or a customer. I told her I would check the truck when I left and come back in if there was anything wrong. She seemed relieved. I heard nothing more about it. Yet I'll never know for sure whether she was right to be worried about it.

Dancers were exposed to more dangers than most other women. Jeannie had a good general sense of people even if some seemed to baffle her. Like many dancers she was mistress of the

non-committal, often painless but unmistakable refusal and how to embed it in her business persona. One afternoon early in 1997 I found her at the bar in seemingly earnest conversation with a shaggy haired fellow in his twenties who exemplified the Bard's "lean and hungry look". His slightly unkempt longish hair and ordinary clothes and intense yet faraway expression could have belonged to a prophet or a maniac. Almost suddenly he left, his beer unfinished, and Jeannie remarked mildly that he was a bit strange. Soon the phone rang. It was for her, and I heard her say, "No, I don't do that." It was the prophet asking for her home phone number. I never saw or heard of him again, so likely he didn't come back. At least she was "up front" instead of giving him the number of a gay bar, say, or maybe a laundromat, some strippers' response to unwanted aspiring dates.

Once she knew someone well enough Jeannie comfortably showed both her relaxed and her constructed side. She didn't resent my never buying her a drink (I did tip her for dancing) because she knew I didn't mind her turning to business when necessary. Early one afternoon we heard the front door and saw its bright rectangle widen and vanish. "Oh, there's some young guys," she said, "I gotta go make some money."

We spent so much time visiting that one girl recognized men because "You always sit with Jeannie." Of course, not always.

We weren't always there at the same time, especially when I only went once a month, and even when we were she was often busy. There were a few times she seemed preoccupied and sat against the wall, usually near the dressing room, sometimes at the mirrored west wall. I didn't think she should be bothered.

We were both naturally reserved, though Jeannie worked well with it; if seldom uncomfortable, lapses of conversation were common. She had an adamant inner strength I sensed as though we were corresponding magnetic poles, and I guessed she felt the same subliminal confrontation. It gave me rare flashes of irritation, and there was an occasional sense of disjoint as when I figured an allusion to Hilton's *Lost Horizon* would fall flat and later thought otherwise. I insisted I was stingy but when for the *n*th time mentioned it was because I was poor she gave me a hug and said, "I bet you've got lots of money stashed away." She wasn't the first female to tell me that, and I had in effect set it up, but whenever one mentions the M word, money, a man needn't be as wise as a lama to know he should take a step back.

If I sometimes felt manipulated I nearly always found Jeannie good company and so did many of the men who went there. She was a person of solid old fashioned virtues — "family values" in the political cant of the day, though she practiced rather than preached — in a place where those who fancy themselves

virtuous wouldn't expect. Often, too, she would casually reveal some new dimension that that and her age rendered totally unexpected. A real country girl whom if I recall correctly gave one of the few performances to country-western music at Legs, she mentioned one day how much she liked the albums of New Age musician Yanni. Did I misunderstand her even more than I realize? I can't say, but she is one of the most worthwhile persons I've known.

The only other stripper I remember distinctly from the old Legs, I didn't really know her, was called Asia. She was big, a word I don't use as a euphemism for fat or large breasted, though she was somewhat gifted in the latter region, but because she was larger than most women, almost my size. Her shows reduced her to a thong bikini bottom, displaying fine milky white skin that contrasted with her ebony pageboy hair. I watched her for at least a couple of years without tipping her because of a tattoo, a hand sized scorpion on her left butt cheek. I don't like tattoos, let alone piercings (even pierced ears), on women.

That's why it took me so long to realize that Asia was beautiful. Not just good looking, not just pretty, but model quality beautiful. As it sunk in I began wondering whether or not she had a profound aesthetic sense. It's certainly easy to feel that the less a

girl wears the more profound her mind. Was she a minimalist, with hair dyed to simple contrast with her fine pale flesh, with a single tattoo as counterpoint that was perhaps replete with personal and cultural meanings? (I don't recall her dance style; maybe it was as minimal as her fashion preferences.) I wished I'd been tipping her all along and decided that one day I would give her a two or a five, and hopefully find out more about her.

But when those thoughts congealed on the cool November day in 1994 that I'd decided would be the season's last I didn't happen to have a two and couldn't spare a five. Besides, since I'd never tipped her before, a one would get her attention. During the second dance of her set I paused by the stage on my way out. Asia squatted at the edge of the platform to put on her personal display.

"Are you a Scorpio?" I asked.

"No, I just saw that design in the tattoo parlor and decided I liked it."

And that was the last time I saw her.

The bar closed a couple of weeks or so later. I saw while driving past and while walking my dogs that it was being remodeled into Sports Cabaret. The Big Lady remained, suggesting that it was still a topless bar. To be sure I decided to go when it reopened, though that was late January or early February.

The sudden darkness and, despite new wood and fresh paint, the smoke and sweepings aroma remained. The stage, as noted earlier, was enlarged and had a second pole, with a second stage opposite it. A couple of carom type game setups that shortly disappeared intervened among the tables. Three cable equipped televisions now hung from the ceiling, on constantly with captioning. One hung above the bar's west end, one just east of it over the short hall to the women's room, and one hung just outside the billiard area in the "party zone's" southwest corner. The remotes were at the bar and from sports the programs were regularly switched to weather, soaps, sitcoms, and movies so old only I could identify the actors. A sports motif – big baseballs under the ceiling fans, pictures of game fish – was the decor.

More importantly, the bar itself was now tile surfaced and thenceforth kept clean. A urinal was on the end of the bar facing the ladies' room and right under the cash register. Like the Big Lady it was one of the bar's well known features, but I never noticed it before Sports Cabaret so I don't know how long it was

there. The bartenders assured me it worked, and though I never saw anyone use it I'm sure many were sorely tempted.

Since it was clean and the place was largely empty except for a couple of dancers I decided to sit at the bar to minimize drink buying hassles, and for the best view took the nearest possible stool to the stage. This became my habit. The girl behind the bar had with her a large brown castrated dog. A man in his fifties or older came up to the bar and stood holding a mixed drink. Apparently a Legs regular, he volunteered that Jeannie and some of the other girls had gone to Fantasy Club (where I'd never been), finished his drink in a swig, and left.

Till Sports Cabaret's clean bar I'd known few dancers and no bartenders. The twenty-five year old dog owner's husband, a successful businessman in his fifties, had bought her the place. She quit bringing the dog, a stray rescued from a mall parkinglot, just when I started bringing him doggie biscuits. When I remarked how clean the tavern now was she said it had indeed been filthy and that all former employees had denied responsibility. Since each had feared ending up the only one to clean, the job never got done, so she started out with a new crew. These girls brought their own kind of problem: they fretted over what to talk to the customers about. Exasperated, she told them to read a newspaper.

One afternoon when a dancer got onstage and gave a long, effortful performance to a barroom devoid of other customers, I remarked, "Odd to perform to an empty room."

"Well, it's part of the job," said the owner. I imagined her saying that if a cop were shot.

A dancer I met one afternoon seemed to justify her impatience with the girls' social skills. About nineteen years old, she sat to my right wearing an elaborate blue and black lingerie outfit and her brown hair was done up in equal detail. After a few minutes she turned to me and said, "You sure don't say much."

I found out that she'd worked at the new Tinseltown Theater complex at SPID and Greenwood till she discovered that dancing paid better. I saw her there a couple of more times.

A few of Sports Cabaret's new bevy were better than usual performers. They clearly practiced more than usual, rehearsing the particular numbers they used, and collaborated with the deejay on arrangements – mainly lighting changes, sometimes sound volume and tone – as well as music selection. One was a marvelously constructed young woman, well breasted, shapely but not skinny, known as Brianna.

Not long into the year I showed up to find a middle aged man standing near some parked cars while a girl of about twenty-two knocked on the foyer's east door. She paused, but when

I recognized her and, perhaps a bit too happily, said "Hi," she began pounding full force at the portal.

"Not open?" I said, trying the door. Brianna made a harried, scarcely audible remark about someone being late. It was past two o'clock and the bar opened between noon and one. She obviously didn't want us to recognize her outside the barroom, so I tried the west door then waited an appropriate distance from her at the entry's south face. At last, after Brianna pounded some more, the girl owner and the deejay drove up. Shortly Brianna (or whoever she was) had safely assumed her stage identity. She wasn't there much longer.

Other girls who were more polished performers followed her example during the bar's first six months. The new name and new dancers may have put off some Legs regulars. One afternoon a man who looked to be about twenty-seven asked the bartender when a particular dancer would be there. Told she was off, he left. For a while Sports Cabaret personnel seemed almost desperate in their efforts to attract and keep customers, trying contests and games, offering free pitchers to anyone bringing in their business meetings. It verged on the embarrassing. Their first partly effective move was rehiring some Legs performers; I recognized few and knew fewer, but girls showed up who assured me they'd worked there for years.

I took to going about once a week year round. I worked rotating shifts so I had different days off each week, but since I seldom went weekends or later than four o'clock I now varied my route to avoid showing too clear a pattern. I seldom went home the same way I'd gone, sometimes using a different street between Nemec and McArdle, sometimes taking the former or SPID to Ayers.

From a tranquil postwar suburbia this neighborhood had declined toward seediness. Several houses, including those next door to mine, had been more than once burglarized; dogs and other measures helped me avoid that. During that era there were drive-by shootings and some incidents at the Mission Shopping Center game parlor. A few houses toward Mansheim Street from mine a young housewife murdered her two small daughters and killed herself. The entire 78415 zip area that included it was designated a high crime district.

I would show up a little after two and leave around four. I carried three or four dollar bills in my right shirt pocket for dancers' tips, and once there usually bought the first beer with a five or a ten and put the change in my left shirt pocket for drink money. This gave conviction to my story they I only brought a certain amount of money because I would otherwise be too

generous and couldn't afford to. I would sit at the bar, as noted, as close to the stage as I could, slowly drink three lite beers, and leave. I always tried to leave when nobody was looking.

Instead of going to the stage I would tip dancers, once they'd performed, if they happened to walk past me or sit nearby. Some realized this right away, the ones I became best acquainted with, while others didn't or at least thought they had some reason to stay away. I explained I was tired or lazy; the girls figured someone not tipping stageside was shy or embarrassed. I simply didn't want to make the effort and risk losing my seat (a possibility, also, in going to the restroom). Occasionally I tossed a bill onstage as I left.

I always tipped the bartender, but never when he or she was looking. To make sure I was known to tip I would spend a long time visibly rolling a bill into a tight little cylinder to drop inside one of the wide mouthed glass decanters that served as tip jars. So instead of tipping one dancer a month I now tipped three or four and the bartender weekly.

While returning from the restroom to my barstool one day I saw Jeannie come in the front door. I felt a spark of anti-magnetism, then she was giving me a hug. She didn't explain her return, but said she'd told the girl boss she'd brought in most of

Legs' afternoon crowd. It sounded like the truth to me. She was worried the girl might be put off by her age, but apparently she wasn't. In fact, the bossette couldn't even figure out how old Jeannie was till I mentioned she was fifty-seven.

I now found it easier to talk with her and much of what I've related about her comes from this time. I sometimes gave her an extra tip, encouraged by her penchant for having the bill stuck in her cleavage, and occasionally stopped at Shamrock's Corner Store to get a chocolate candy she liked.

When she returned, or shortly after, Jeannie had been contacted by the trash television program *The Jenny Jones Show*, thanks to her granddaughter, about appearing in a makeover episode. She wondered whether the owners would mind having part of her episode taped in the bar. It looked to me like good publicity for Sports Cabaret and just the kind of exposure Jeannie would like, but she decided against it. Her father was still living and her grandchildren were still in school and she didn't want to cause them any embarrassment.

A year or so later we were at the bar when a young man steered in a weary looking old fellow in a wheelchair whom he situated at a table before leaving for a couple of hours. Explaining that he was a friend recovering from serious surgery, Jeannie joined him.

After a while she entered and exited the women's restroom, then helped him maneuver his wheelchair into the short passageway by the stage. She pressed back the door as he rolled in, then stood nearby.

"He still has a hard time getting around," she told me, "so I thought it would be easier for him."

She still appeared at least fifteen years younger than she was, especially onstage where she danced as energetically as the semi-polished girls who were leaving. The only move I never saw her do was climb the pole and slide toward the floor upside down. Her dancing combined standard steps with prancing, stepping back and forth, turning with or without the pole, and lolling sensually on the floor. She tossed her long hair, she fixed gazes with customers and crawled toward them on hands and knees, and demonstrated the superb individual control she had over her pectoral muscles. Sometimes she gave a loud whoop or yip, more likely from boredom than to attract flagging attention since she always appeared to be having fun — the best attention getter. Yes, a well endowed woman *can* jump about without support for thirty years and not sag, and, yes, her endowments *really were* natural.

Despite her apparent health and the two decade lag between her condition and her age, Jeannie insisted that cigarette smoke was killing her. She was going to die from second hand

smoke, and it was the main reason she gave for wanting to retire. She had no intention of remaining idle. She considered operating boat tours of Laguna Madre, but her main idea was to open a bar. Hers, likely to be downtown, would be non-smoking. Once she outlined her plans, adding,

"It's easy to get a liquor license except for topless bars. That's real hard right now, but there's no reason you can't add entertainment after you're open."

Sports Cabaret went through personnel changes besides hiring and rehiring some dancers. At some time the deejay was a tall fellow in the twenties-thirties range who had long dark hair. The longest lasting, also good sized and the same age, had hair so short he probably qualified as a skinhead. He had a pleasant, friendly manner and did an excellent job.

A big girl around twenty-six or twenty-eight years old with the wholesome beauty and cheerful persona men dream of became bartender. I forget her name. She was from Arizona, where her daughter spent much time with her ex. Why she'd come here I also forget, but it was likely a relationship. She used to be a dancer, which she loved, but had injured a leg or hip. Whether permanent or repairable with enough money the injury kept her from doing what she really wanted to: climbing onstage. She was completely

unembarrassed by what she did and unlike Brianna didn't care if she were recognized. She said she used to greet customers by name if she happened upon them out shopping with their wives. Outgoing and cheerily roguish as she was, as she took on more management functions and hired other bartenders she proved able to swiftly, coldly deal with personnel problems and distractions from the task at hand.

I thought Sports Cabaret was beginning to do well, but she told me it barely broke even and some months lost money. No doubt this is what led that fall to their second somewhat effective measure to restore business, changing the name back to Legs. "The same old Legs," one radio commercial said. New matchbooks were printed and so were Legs T-shirts. Much to my regret I never bought one. I didn't want to compromise my stingy alibi by pulling out a twenty or my identity by writing a check and the ATM briefly stationed beside the bar end urinal charged too high a fee. When I decided I'd better go ahead and get one they were all gone.

The notorious girlie sign remained through these changes. During its last few years the left foot became detached and before the sign's final incarnation as a redhead with rather finely detailed features and costume someone used a balloon or other breakable, likely aimed from a passing vehicle at the sign's crotch, to splatter black paint on the upper legs. Whenever it was

redone as well as during local elections and city government crises it would be the focus of scathing attacks. A bulletin board on the foyer wall sometimes had relevant newspaper clippings tacked up with the usual ads for concerts and sporting events.

In the early and mid nineties the City Council attacked topless bars. This wasn't in response to women's complaints since these were constant and generally ignored, though that was part of the given reasons. The purpose was to divert attention from their decision to build the Lake Texana pipeline over the voters' rejection after having to admit that the dam and the seawall needed expensive repairs. They made a show of hearing owners and employees present their case then restricted the bars, no grandfather clauses, to certain areas at the end of six or eight years. There was a flurry of media coverage, television especially, using a version of President Clinton's phony morality by asking what to tell children about "what goes on" in such places.

The extent of this propaganda's effects as well as of women's inability to be reasonable about certain matters became clear to me when I was riding with a female friend and we happened to pass in sight of Legs. One of the smartest women I've known (her real name, incidentally, sounded like a stripper's stage name), she possessed an acute and incisive mind, she was creative,

widely read, and at forty-eight no ingenue. She directed the same blasphemous and pungently obscene comments at Legs and the Big Lady that she'd just applied to another driver, then, to my astonishment said she simply didn't know what to tell her five year old granddaughter (also blessed with a dancer appropriate name) about the sign.

'Tell her that people who own businesses make their money from the people who come in,' I said, 'so they put up signs that look pretty or interesting to get as many people to come in as they can.'

That took most of the hurricane out of her sails for a while. As to telling children "what goes on" in bars, as though overloading them with detailed information is necessary, I'd say grownups drink and dance there.

The media claimed vice and violence were more common in topless bars. That's not what I saw unless the media considered the sexy talk and nudity it was itself increasingly displaying to be vices. If there was any hands-on activity under tables or in corners I didn't notice it. Legs installed some video gambling machines and soon the city or county or state cracked down on certain kinds of these, but not the ones at Legs. I didn't witness any blatant situations involving coke or smack. The girls mentioned customers' wives showing up and staging scenes, even

dragging them out, but I never saw that happen anywhere, either. I know of two incidents in 1996 or 1997, one best described as ludicrous.

A small brunette, maybe a waitress, terrified of a boyfriend who apparently had hit her, ran around the bar and through the utility room to the congenial young man tending. The boyfriend was over six feet tall and built like a football player, as were a couple of other men who were in some way his associates. These two, the only persons present who could have stopped him, made some comments about how despicable it was to hit women (in terms considerably less refined). The entire sequence of action seemed to repeat, then was done with. I asked the bartender, "Is the soap opera over?"

Then there was the afternoon I noticed a dining table sized area of missing plaster and cracked cinder blocks on the outside wall facing Dodd Street. The same bartender was there and he explained what had happened.

Several days before when a couple of guys who'd been drinking for hours ordered more beer he told them they'd had enough. A customer a few seats down the bar asked if he could order three beers at once, so the bartender refused and told him he'd also had enough. All three left. A few minutes later a

Shamrock employee rushed in and asked if anyone were injured. Nobody knew what he was talking about.

The drunks had gotten in a pickup, backed across Dodd into the Shamrock lot, and then floored the gas pedal. They crashed into the side of the building, knocking off plaster and damaging a few bricks, then backed up and took Dodd to the SPID frontage road, which they followed away. A trail of glass, chrome, and plastic fragments, and anti-freeze marked the crime scene and getaway. A couple of girls in the dressing room heard a thud, but the music was so loud and the walls so thick nobody else heard anything. Till the filling station attendant dashed in nobody in Legs knew anything had happened.

Often when I arrived dancers would be at the bar having a fast food lunch, or breakfast, and several spent time there between sets. Sometimes those with the day off or a later shift dropped by, now and then with toddlers who inevitably enchanted everyone. This enabled me to become well acquainted with more than I had at the old Legs.

In contrast, I never knew the other customers and seldom exchanged a word with any. I don't recall even recognizing any regulars. The only one of them I remember even hearing anything about was a ~~man~~ who'd been retired for thirty years from

a teaching career that had lasted more than fifty. Although about one hundred years old, he kept trying to get the strippers to go home with him. They all denied ever having done so.

I probably found the bar personnel more interesting than they found me. When the bar posted a sign on the door that IDs were required I jokingly asked the bartender on two occasions if he needed to see mine. I'd forgotten asking him the first time till I saw he was irritated the second.

My house was built in 1947, and the girls were amazed when I said that throughout the early 1950s the bells of SS Cyril and Methodius church were audible at Ayers Street and beyond. The fleets of propeller aircraft that often filled the skies till about 1955 were another odd, briefly interesting historical footnote. They didn't know that the land thereabouts had been Nemec's farm, the house and barn having stood where the Borden Plant was later built. Some time around 1900, I heard long ago, Nemec's predecessor, perhaps a relative, had waged a gun battle with outlaws around Borden's future location and across the future Ayers Street and Mission Shopping Center. That about ended anything of interest to them.

Originally a lane where the farmer maneuvered his tractor, McArdle between Ayers and Easter Street remained a dirt road through the 1950s. The streets from Archer through Dodd

dead ended past the 4833/34 addresses on a vacant lot bordered by McArdle and stretching from Ayers to the backyard fences of homes on Easter. The Borden parking lot and adjoining lawn on McArdle were the site of the Nemec pigsty. About 1952 Mr. Tettleton at 4834 Archer and owner of Tettleton Floor Company, bought that space and built there a now long vanished house for his mother. The neighborhood behind Legs was developed out of this area through the 1970s.

SPID was Lexington Boulevard during much of this time. In 1950 a number of what were called honky-tonks or beer joints lined it. At night the music from these could be heard at our house; so could police and ambulance sirens and occasional horrendous car crashes. I don't know if the future Legs' building was one of these, but if Jeannie was there as a teenager it had to have been built and open before 1958. By the early 1960s Lexington was a four lane divided highway with a broad grassy median, lined with more respectable businesses — information no doubt fascinating to the bar's *habitués* for a second or two.

Fascinated or not the dancers were all different kinds of persons, a few of whom were jerks. For a long time *Days of Our Lives* ran from one to two o'clock and I timed my visit by it. A slightly pudgy young blonde who like the Tinseltown usherette

dressed in layers of gauzy lingerie to female rather than male taste wanted to know the latest developments. This went on for a couple of weeks or so till she asked if I would tape another soap every day, *General Hospital* or *The Young and the Restless* or whatever, and bring her the tapes. Which I would not. She didn't have much to say after that and soon was gone.

Two girls who didn't stay long claimed worthy ambitions. I remember sitting at a table with each but neither's name. Maybe they were at the old Legs or maybe the barstools were taken the days I met them. Both were in their twenties and not very shapely. Both had soft flesh with poor muscle tone. One said she planned to be a cop and would soon be attending police academy. I recall how she sprawled on the stage floor, sometimes rolling about to place her back to the audience, whom she then regarded over a shoulder with doe-eyed seductiveness as she resoundingly swatted herself on the behind. I doubted she'd become a cop, but found her shapelier than the other brunette, who planned to become an elementary school teacher. She would soon take education courses at Del Mar College, but had no idea when classes began (they already had) or what they cost.

With another temporary performer I had an exchange that like my encounter with the ex-Marine, but more directly, echoed the universal barroom joke about the middle aged man and

the girl half his age. I can be absolutely certain it happened in 1996. I first saw her onstage and thought her cute and alright but not outstanding as a dancer. I picked up other girls' untypical comments on "that weird woman."

She occupied the barstool next to mine, chainsmoking and drinking coffee into which she dumped packet after packet of sugar. Though she couldn't sit still and her thoughts scattered constantly in several directions this seemed more her natural condition than the result of strong drugs. Her name escapes me, but I remember she was from Houston or had come here from Houston. I guessed that she was trying out stripping where nobody knew her, a hypothesis that fit her apparent nervousness till she told a nearly coherent story about enticing customers into a Houston bar from a swing out front. She wasn't nervous or stoned, she was nuts.

Another day she sat next to me chainsmoking and guzzling supersweetened java. Unable to hold still or quit talking, she several times lit a cigarette with one still smoldering in the ashtray and asked for more coffee with the cup still half full.

"Are you sure you need more coffee?" I asked, picturing her becoming ever more hyper.

"Yeah, it's smoking I need to quit."

"Oh, I'm not so sure those things are as bad for you as they say."

"Oh, yes, they are. I just cough and hack all the time."

"Well, I quit because they got too expensive, and that was twenty-three years ago."

"That was 1973," she said, perking up almost normally with recognition.

"That's right."

"Yeah! That's the year I was born!"

On the other hand there was this wiry brunette in her late thirties. She was there a couple of years, as I recall, but likely insisted she'd been there much longer. I can't remember her name, either, but a distinctive dance move and obvious intelligence remain in my mind. Once her top was off she would raise her arms straight up, palms out, swaying and stepping forward and backward. As she did this she made eye contact with a customer and, head slightly cocked, raised her eyebrows in a look at once questioning and appealing.

Her demeanor lacked hesitation, rough edges. It's a testimony to this woman's cleverness that I'm left with little besides an impression of competence. She did tell me she owned a specialty auto repair business in a nearby town and had opened a fast Mexican food stand in its parkinglot. I'm sure that when she left it was because she had enough money.

Two girls who were there a long time called themselves Kennedy and Mystery. Both were tallish, slender, good looking brunettes who danced well. Mystery had long, straight, slightly darker hair, maybe tattoos. Kennedy had lighter, curlier hair that spilled all about her head and neck. Once as I wrote on one of my index cards, an addition to a grocery list most likely, Kennedy leaned over to look: just curious, she said. Maybe I exchanged some other words with her and Mystery, but that's all that comes to mind.

There was a third brunette, a most distinctive person who called herself Jade. She was in her twenties, obviously adult, but so delicately made she looked like she'd break if handled. Her khaki hair and her fine bone structure she accented with green eyeshadow to enhance her ethereal look. She accepted tips and sometimes she just moved with a quality that can only be described as gracious. Settled on a barstool, speaking in tones that sounded almost plaintive, she conveyed with a cryptic firmness that made her fragility seem an illusion that she simply wouldn't be bothered.

But what first caught my attention was Jade's completely blank expression as she danced. I watched her how many times before remarking to another ecdysiast, "That girl never changes her expression."

"She's probably bored," was the response.

After maybe a year I did see her smile. A customer said something as he gave her a tip and she smiled prettily, if briefly. I'd describe her smile as adorable if that weren't such a fruity word. Afterward I occasionally saw her expression change.

She and Kennedy sometimes did duets and girl-girl displays. One of the few Saturdays I went to Legs Jade joined Kennedy onstage where they spoke a second before each brushed her hair into a frizzy mop and over her crown. Side by side, hands on thighs, in unison they nodded vigorously to the music left, center, right, center, left, flouncing their brown manes to vocal and monetary approval. Another time Kennedy lay back, lower legs over the edge of the stage, while Jade danced above her. A different day, while Jade danced, someone gave her tip to Kennedy, who took it to the stage and to everyone's appreciation received the customary show and kiss.

During dances the girls saved their places at the bar by leaving drinks, lit cigarettes, and purses. The latter were typically small and stuffed with assorted materiel. Jade was no exception to their ability to fit an incredible number of items therein. Early one afternoon she finished her set and returned to the barstool beside mine, where she proceeded to dig around in her purse, extracting boxes and bottles.

"Uh-oh," said the congenial male bartender, "she's putting on her demon nails."

With exquisite precision Jade applied long, curving, talonlike artificial nails to her real ones, let the glue dry, then after a slight touchup with an emery board opened one of those rigidly geometrical little paint bottles. There was a minute industrial odor as she used the bottle cap's tiny brush to paint a threatening, stony green on the implants.

"Oh, *Jade*," I said in sudden comprehension. She froze midmotion, her expression subdued expectation, as though to avoid worsening some unwitting error. "*That's* what the green's for."

With brief silent laughter, her acknowledgment, she continued her project. It was our most meaningful exchange. In her subtle, consistent self-expression, so different from Asia's permanently displayed whim, I glimpsed an understated intelligence that grasped the distinction between privacy and mere physical modesty.

Diane, average height and prettily proportioned, had blonde shoulder length shag ended hair. High cheekbones, narrow eyes, and a small mouth gave her face a fascinatingly exotic eurasian cast, but her flesh tones and (as I remember them) blue eyes were recessively caucasian. She had but one physical blemish:

her upper incisors were pushed forward slightly and set at seemingly painful angles to the natural dental line. My guess is that her jaw and palate were small, her teeth average sized, and that her family had been too poor to fix them. Soon after we met Diane told me she was thirty-one years old.

It wasn't the first thing she said to me. What I first said to her was probably, "Here's a tip." Her response, however, was to make sure I knew she was married. Did she think all men craved her or did she just want to discourage the unworthy in advance? Or was she seeking those who found that circumstance exciting? She was from New York state, married to a serviceman, but it escapes me whether he was from here or just stationed here. Her kid, she told me, was the world's most important person.

In cool weather I wore T-shirts, often bearing messages, under my usual western shirts. Some time around February of 1997 Diane walked directly to where I sat, held the unbuttoned western shirt open and solemnly regarded the message "Everyone Lies", then, without a word, let go and walked on.

She proved downright bossy so I used a line women really ate up and asked if she were in charge. She denied it, quite truthfully I discovered, but obviously pleased asked me why I thought so. I told her she seemed so confident I figured she was the boss there or had her own business. We occasionally sat at the bar

and talked after that but can't have said anything important because not even the gist of a subsequent conversation comes to mind.

I realized one afternoon that her assertiveness, as it was then politely termed, gave her co-workers trouble and probably plenty of it. I was talking with Jeannie at the bar when Diane, sitting just the other side of her, got up after a while and strode past.

"Why don't you buy the young lady a drink?" she asked, all high heels and trailing lingerie.

"She knows I don't do that," I said, momentarily irritated. They all knew it and they were supposed to be hustling money. Diane did that, possibly waiting for the bartender to be in hearing range, to harass Jeannie, who was old enough to be her mother and still a highly successful dancer attractive to young men. Maybe the other girls gave her the respect Diane wanted, maybe there were other things going on.

Momentarily Jeannie looked as though she'd been given a shove while standing at the edge of a cliff. There was nothing to say or do.

A couple of weeks or so later I happened to show up when the Arizona girl was tending bar and Diane was onstage.

"You know," I said, "sometimes that blonde girl can be really bossy."

"Yeah," said the big girl, "I have to put her in her place now and then when she gets out of hand, and she really gets pissed."

That admittedly satisfying information didn't keep me from seeing Diane's tartly positive side. I guessed she was doing what she enjoyed, though I suspected part of the enjoyment involved having the attention of other women's men. Her exotic yet all-American features with their single liability made her simultaneously beautiful and regular. I easily imagined her as a high school heartbreaker and an efficient, no-nonsense homemaker.

Some time after the Holidays I noticed Diane hadn't been there for a while. A bartender said she'd gone to New York and he didn't know when she'd be back. Or if. She did come back but her absence seemed a symptom of the bar's malaise.

During the first half of 1998 I saw fewer and fewer dancers there till finally I recall seeing only Diane and Jeannie. According to a female bartender (not the strapping Arizona wench)

Legs was losing money and "management is the problem." In my experience management almost always is, but I also think that changes in surrounding businesses and traffic had rendered the location less effective and that the place never recovered from the Sports Cabaret episode.

Personally, despite my limit of three beers and never a drop more there or otherwise, I was coming to dislike alcohol more than ever. Its taste and mellow effects remained pleasant but didn't compensate for having to spend a couple of hours drowsy and half competent when I was ready to do something else. My system was coming increasingly to reject it. A year from the events narrated below even a couple of swallows gave me a piercing headache. And what had started out as a break in routine had become itself a routine that needed moderating.

Around the beginning of June the bartender told me Diane wanted me to call her somewhere, another club I think. He had my first name right and I matched the description he had. I didn't follow through, though, not only because there was a trace of uncertainty the message was for me, but because it could have involved a game and she could certainly be a difficult person. At any rate, she'd left Legs.

Then I arrived to find an uncharacteristically well lighted barroom in a flurry of activity where people ran about

measuring things and making sketches. I'd been there before during remodeling so it seemed no big deal till I asked the bartender, a slender dark haired college girl, about it. She said some people from Missouri had bought the bar and were planning many changes, including taking down the Big Lady.

The Big Lady was by then probably the bar's only asset, and it was a local landmark of sorts. I reported their plans to the media, who found it worth looking into. The new owners told the newspaper that the sign "didn't fit our image" and that theirs was "an image driven business." They planned to rename the place Texas Gold, install a marble foyer and a cigar smoking lounge, and run it as an upscale club. I was sure it would fail. I wondered whether these namby-pamby yuppies knew that after December 2002 topless bars were supposed to be limited to certain areas that didn't include this one.

For part of June 1998 Legs opened at six, so on a day Jeannie told me she would be there I arrived about the latest I ever had, around seven. A few customers were there and the yuppies were scurrying about planning. Jeannie, still in her street clothes, had a drink with me at the bar. I asked if the new owners planned to keep Legs employees and she didn't know. I said if they didn't, I wouldn't be back, a decision I was already close to.

She asked a yuppie if they wanted her to dance and he said to go ahead, so she changed into her barely there outfit. Jeannie, who was sixty years old but still fit enough to be in her forties, was apparently the last dancer at Legs. When she came back to the bar she said she had to go out of town because of family illness. I told her to let me know if anything drastic happened, meaning if the yuppies fired everyone. That was the last time I was there; the place was closed a few weeks during which the Big Lady was taken down.

After a while there were seldom many vehicles in Texas Gold's parkinglot and it often appeared closed. On a Saturday in the spring of 1999 I stopped for gas at the Shamrock station where I'd gotten Diet Cokes on my way home and bought Jeannie's occasional chocolate treat. When I mentioned the bar's deserted look to the cashier she said it had gone under.

That August someone at work asked me about Regina's Cabaret, in the same building. I hadn't noticed it, but newspaper ads soon announced its opening. I saw that the building had a fresh coat of creamy white paint with a wide pink band about four feet above the sidewalk running like a ribbon around the Dodd and SPID sides; at night pink fluorescent lights under the overhang gave the white paint a rose tint. The "No motorcycles..." sign was

finally gone and under the new number 2530 a mailbox covered the mail slot.

On top of the Big Lady's frame, replacing the similarly rectangular Texas Gold sign was one reading "Regina's Cabaret A Gentleman's Club". It bore the logo of a girl sitting, legs extended, wearing a red dress and holding a rose, framed by Rapunzel length blonde tresses. A banner on the south roof frame repeated this and a sheet plastic sign on the wall below it announced the grand opening.

It was more attractive than Texas Gold and its newspaper ads announced feature performers. I wondered whether entering remained a plunge into darkness suffused with that same smell of smoke, suds, and etceteras. However, a co-worker named Dane Bybee, from the same small Missouri town as the yuppies, said they still owned the bar. "Gentlemen" is a sex industry euphemism for "rich guys", which told me that only the "image" had changed.

Sure enough, Regina's soon had fewer and fewer vehicles in the parkinglot, though the pink fluorescent lights always stayed on. The neighborhood, if it could by then support a bar at all, needed a laid back blue collar place, not a pretentiously upper crust cabaret propped up on its own facade.

I stopped at the Corner Store for gas one fall day. The clerk this time was an old lady. I say "old lady" from habit, since she wasn't much older than I, certainly than Jeannie.

"Looks like that place is closed," I said, looking out the window behind her and nodding that direction.

"Well, good!" she said, "They ought to close them all down!" I pictured her avidly reading bodice rippers and scandal rags.

In December 1999 the south facing roof frame that had supported the sign of stockinged legs held up a plastic banner reading "Business for Sale" over a phone number. Whatever was to follow would belong to another time and another century.

Corpus Christi, Texas

August 1999 - April 2000

Copies of *Behind the Big Lady*
are \$ 20.00 each, from

Textar Media, Inc.
P. O. Box 7308
Corpus Christi,
Texas 78467-7308